STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 68

THE WASHINGTONIAN
January 1982

No More Rat Race

And No More Office Hours, No More Traffic Jams—But If You Decide to Change Your Life, Be Prepared to Come to Terms with Your God, Your Spouse, and Yourself

By Les Whitten

Sometimes I feel these days like the only whole man at a reunion of the Light Brigade. I have my arms and legs. My two eyes are patchless. My flesh, although I'm 53 and counting, is uncratered.

Around me are the comrades with whom I have made the Passage Perilous: once-celebrated reporters from the *Washington Star*—who are now graying and on the dole; PR men who served half a dozen administrations ably—now broken, Reaganized, or retired on half-pay; pals from formerly well-funded do-good outfits—now scratching for consulting jobs. How could life have undone so many? Involuntary dropouts!

I spend my mornings at home. The house is mine—my calm, mortgageless kingdom. First, I do my back-strengthening exercises to repair disc muscles pulled by so much golf. My wife and son have left too feverishly to do their breakfast dishes. I do them.

I grind my coffee beans in my father's ancient electric grinder. He has been dead 20 years. Sometimes I talk to him as I make the coffee. Downstairs in my cellar office, I turn on one of three classical stations, hoping for Italians, happy with Richard Strauss. I ascertain from the business pages that my principal has been further depleted, but that my income is still shakily adequate. I write a letter or two, an agenda for the day.

Then to the main thing: my novel, which does not quite work yet; my translations of Baudelaire (*Les Fleurs* nearly done); my own poems; an article; a review; a short story.

Other days, I golf with a son or friend, cycle with my wife in Vermont, have a long lunch on the terrace of Old Angler's Inn with a male crony dented by time or erty or Wintergreen or other one-day places; I ski on weekdays, when there are no lift lines. I go to California once a year to ski with my son the ski instructor. In fall, when the weather is good and the tourists are gone, I go to Europe for a month, always spending part of it in Venice.

There are two drawbacks, two payments for my happiness. My wife never wanted me to do this, and now, as she begins to flourish independently, she may not want this new me despite our better than 30 years together. And, because I have given up the shared byline with Jack Anderson that appeared in hundreds of newspapers, it is harder to sell my books.

But, overall, as a voluntary dropout I am happier than I have ever been in my life. I am content and terribly grateful to God, even though I am not sure He, She, It, or They is or are out there. I also know, and this qualification seems essential, that it may not last.

News was my provender until I dropped out. I realized I wasn't bad at it on the *Washington Post* in the late '50s and early '60s. Later, with Hearst, I did well. When Drew Pearson died, I became Jack Anderson's Jack Anderson. I never cheated Jack on time, doing my books on weekends—cheating, if anyone, my family. In my early years with Jack, he once said to me:

"Why would a person want to be a second-rate novelist when he can be a first-rate reporter?" I was never good enough to be a first-rate reporter, though he was right about my being a second-rate novelist. "I don't know," I said. But I did know.

I had wanted to be a poet since I was 17. When I was 21 between my junior and senior years at Lehigh, I went to Paris and took my poems to Raymond Duncan's studio there.

He was the brother of Isadora Duncan and given to wearing togas, sandals, long in junior high school. I said I could.

"Okay," he said. "I've got a California box and some fonts, and you can set the poems and print them, and I'll teach you how to bind them. You can sell them in the cafés, or if nobody'll buy them, you can give them away."

Perhaps I should have stayed. Or perhaps not. In any case, I came home, finished school, and became a newsman, which is what I stayed for 27 years. All the while, on my own time, I was writing: unsuccessful poems, moderately successful short stories, fairly successful novels—and then, in 1976, a very successful novel.

When *Conflict of Interest* sold to a paperback publisher for $360,000, of which I got half, and the advance for *Sometimes a Hero*, my subsequent novel, netted me $75,000, I knew I could start selling poems in cafés.

The way I added it up was that, barring investment disasters, the book money plus what my frugal wife and I had saved would let me live without being a salaried worker anymore.

In the summer of 1977, I went to a convention of Investigative Reporters and Editors, a group Jack and I had helped found and which I had named. Its acronym is IRE. Those hundreds of eager-eyed young reporters made me think that there were Les Whittens all over the place for Jack to enlist if he wanted to.

On the plane back to Washington, I suggested to Jack that maybe he ought to groom somebody else as his number-one man in case I burned out. But he didn't understand or didn't want to. Then, in October of that year, I asked him to lunch. We went to Trader Vic's, his turf.

Now here I was with a man I loved and respected, whose good opinion I valued greatly, a man who had given me half the byline of the most important and widely circulated column in America.

He had anointed me as his heir—he